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The Pixel Frontier: Electronic Books Twenty-first Century In The Library

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The author examines the growing popularity and acceptance of e-books by taking a look at their availability, strengths and weaknesses, acceptance by users, and ways to introduce readers to the format. This was accomplished through a survey of the literature, observations of users, and an informal survey of students at Carson-Newman College.

Students now want academic libraries to be open 24/7. While many large university libraries have answered demands by increasing hours of operation to or near 24/7, others find this economically unfeasible...

While many large university libraries have answered their demands by increasing hours of physical operation to or near 24/7, others find this economically unfeasible, especially from a staffing perspective. This demand is being met in many libraries through electronic resources available on and off campus 24/7. While electronic journals have met great acceptance, electronic books have generally not been as widely used.

AVAILABILITY
Some electronic book projects have been around for a long time. Project Gutenberg dates back to the “Gopher” days of Internet access. This collection, which continues to maintain an FTP presence, also maintains a WorldWide Web presence. Its emphasis remains on classic literary works, and its cost to users is still free. Perseus, which is an electronic books initiative devoted to the classics, has been available for many years from Tufts University. Alex: Catalog of Electronic Texts on the Internet, originally part of North Carolina State University’s site, allows users to make an e-book from its collection of texts, primarily in the public domain, in a format of their choice.

The first best-selling author to venture into the e-book frontier was Stephen King. On March 14, 2000, he released Riding the Bullet in electronic format. (Oda, 2002) While it met with some success, it did not provide an enduring boost that some publishers had hoped it would. There are still a number of publishers who produce e-books of their best-selling authors. Fictionwise.com has marketed a product called LibWise to libraries. Libraries pay a fee based on anticipated circulation. A library paying $29.95 for 250 checkouts is paying about twelve cents per use; a library paying $139.95...
for 5000 checkouts is paying only about four cents per use. (Crawford, 2003)

Since its purchase by OCLC, netLibrary has enjoyed greater success as a subscription e-book database in the library market. Cleveland Public Library has replaced netLibrary with a product called OverDrive which allows users the flexibility of downloading the book to their PC or PDA for offline reading. (Crawford, 2003) Another collection marketed to libraries is ebrary which is available via Ohionet, Amigos, Nelinet, Palinet, and other library consortia. Some e-book collections, such as ACLS History E-book Project, offer specialized collections in one subject at reasonable costs.

There are a few projects which offer subscription titles and publicly available titles. One of these is the California Digital Library which features eScholarship editions from the University of California Press. Some of these projects have partnerships. For example, University of Virginia’s Etext Centre has many free offerings, but some are available only to the campus community. They have a partnership with netLibrary. (Sawyer, 2002) In efforts to gain popularity for the Adobe ebook reader, Adobe Content Server 3.0 has teamed up with many book vendors to offer libraries starter packs of up to five copies of one hundred titles. (Rogers and Albanece, 2002)

Questia still markets itself to the end-user rather than to the library. It costs $19.95 per month, $44.95 per quarter, or $119.95 per year to the user and renews automatically unless cancellation is requested. (http://www.questia.com) Users can also purchase e-books from Amazon.com and other sources on an individual basis. Ebookgazette.com is a newsletter which offers new monthly title lists. Some publishers are even beginning to offer libraries the ability to purchase these individual titles.

STRENGTHS

While it is unlikely that these e-book collections are going to replace the print collections entirely in the immediate future, they can be tremendous supplements to the local collections. These collections can be available to the researcher when it is not feasible for the physical library to be open. They can also be tremendous assets to colleges offering courses by distance education. (Sawyer, 2002)

While electronic journals have met great acceptance, electronic books have generally not been as widely used.

While students can often “check out” the book from such an electronic book collection, there are no overdue fines if they forget to return the book on time. It is simply returned for them. One of the features enjoyed by many users of netLibrary and similar e-book collections is the ability to take notes while reading the item online. (Esposito, 2003) They are also able to adjust the font size as needed for easier viewing. (Sawyer, 2002)

The electronic book can become interactive for the reader. In traditional print medium, a reader locates the source through a footnote and then must locate the original item. In the virtual environment, the link can be directly to the source of the information rather than just giving a footnote. If a word might be unfamiliar, there can be links directly to online dictionaries or encyclopedias for further exploration. The bibliographic entries can be linked to a library’s online catalog, to an online bookseller, or to Books in Print. (Esposito, 2003)

WEAKNESSES

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage of the e-book is that platforms have not been standardized. There are a variety of e-book readers available and users must be certain that an e-book is compatible with their reader. If e-books are not available in multiple e-book formats, some readers will be unable to access certain titles.

Staring at computer screens for long periods of time has always been problematic. Some e-book devices have very poor resolution. (Sawyer, 2002) Some e-books do not make an effort to package their text in an attractive format. This leads to further problems in this area of readability.

There are some technical issues associated with the availability of memory in the reading device versus the size of the e-book that can be problematic in some cases. In many instances, no technical support or help desks are available for persons needing assistance with such matters. (Sawyer, 2002)

Librarians frequently encounter complaints regarding the print limits that are placed on certain e-books. Publishers are very concerned about copyright. Many of the license agreements do not even allow for “fair use.” The publishers have kept an eye on the Napster vs. RIAA case in the music industry and are seeking models that will keep piracy of their products to a minimum. One model they are examining is Reed-Elsevier’s ejournal model. This would give “added value” to the product but only when it is on the publisher’s network. When someone tries to pirate a copy, it loses these added features and minimizes its value. (Esposito, 2003)

A similar concern is that of cut-and-paste plagiarism from users. Many e-book publishers have disabled the ability to cut-and-paste, but it is still present for some models. Authors also have a concern over the integrity of their text. They are afraid that in an electronic environment they will lose control of the editorial process as others will be able to interact with their text and possibly change the author’s intent. (Esposito, 2003)

The library is not the owner of the e-book; it is merely licensed to them for use. In most cases, if a library does not
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library because users are going to demand them. They want access to information 24/7, and e-books are one way to provide it. Formats will evolve over time. The e-book of the future will be more of an "electronic paper" concept. (Max, 2001) In the mean time, librarians must provide reliable access to what is presently available to users. The barriers to access must be overcome by providing readers for special formats and as many resources as possible in formats which do not require proprietary hardware or software for viewing. Users need to be aware of the benefits and ethical responsibilities of using such resources wisely.

REFERENCES


EBOOK SOURCES

netLibrary
http://www.netlibrary.com/

Project Gutenberg
http://promo.net/pg/

Gutenberg-e
http://www.gutenberg-e.org/

ACLS History e-book project
http://www.historyebook.org/

University of Virginia Etext Centre
http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/

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http://www.ipl.org/

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http://www.questia.com/

Online Books Page
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Alex: Catalog of Electronic Texts on the Internet
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